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ABSTRACT

The experiences of a teacher of English as a second language in teaching reading in English to an enthusiastic and illiterate Ethiopian woman married to an American and living in the United States are described. The Ethiopian woman was eager to talk on the telephone, take messages for her husband, go to the store by herself, read to her nursery-school-age son, and learn new recipes. The teacher took the language experience approach to instruction, and began by preparing a unit on cooking pancakes, a desired skill, by combining reading the recipe, making a shopping list, going to the store, making the pancakes, and creating a language experience story based on a wordless children's book about making pancakes. In this and other stories the student created, she dictated the story, which the teacher read back to her, and kept a copy to study during the following week. The first stories consisted of simple descriptions of pictures, and progressed to descriptions with expressions of the characters' feelings, actions, and reasoning, and then to a connected story with a beginning, middle, and end, and finally to a story about a picture of herself in which she compares herself to a nursery story character. In the last story, she showed that she could use literature as a tool for becoming conscious of her own environment and experience. (MSE)

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Amaba: Learning to Read in a Second Language

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Amaba

Amaba is a woman from Ethiopia, married to an American, whom she met in Ethiopia. Amaba is about 5'7" tall; she wears her dark curly hair in an Afro. She is a buxom woman who takes great pride in her appearance and in the appearance of her children.

When we began our tutoring sessions last summer, Amaba could neither speak nor read English. She was also illiterate in her own language. During the summer, we worked primarily on her speaking ability because she wanted to learn how to communicate in the English speaking world around her and she wanted to learn immediately. As the summer came to a close, Amaba had learned enough of the English language so that she felt as though she was " ... free from prison", as she so poignantly put it.

As the fall semester began, I approached her husband to ask if I could continue tutoring her (for free this time, as he had stopped the tutoring because $5 an hour was getting too expensive). My reason for wanting to continue tutoring her was twofold. First, I missed Amaba. She had stolen a place in my heart because she was so kind and friendly and willing to learn. She was also very appreciative of all my efforts. I was her link to the outside world in English. Secondly, I had studied about

and used the psycholinguistic theory of reading extensively in my classes at SIU's Center for English as a Second Language, and I wanted the opportunity to discover if the theory could be applied to such an unusual case--a second language learner learning to read for the first time in her second language.

The psycholinguistic theory is based on the idea that reading must be done in a context--a meaningful context. The key to the psycholinguistic theory is helping readers to derive meaning from the text. Reading isolated words or learning how to form sounds isn't reading, according to this theory. Instead, the psycholinguistic theory advocates reading of whole, complete texts; encourages guessing at the meaning of the words that the reader doesn't know from the context of the story; and encourages skipping words that one doesn't understand. The assumption is that if a word is essential to the story, it will be presented again in a different way. If a student can get the gist of the story, that's what's important, not whether or not the student can answer the comprehension questions or pronounce every word in the story or recite the definition of every word. As Kenneth Goodman states:

> ... reading is a psycholinguistic process in which the reader tries to construct meaning from printed material by using three systems--the

graphophonic, the syntactic, and the semantic--simultaneously and interdependently. (1973: 24)

Amaba and I began our tutoring sessions by developing some goals. Because I'm an advocate of Freire and his idea of "Adult-Adult" relationships, I wanted to develop goals for our future tutoring sessions that centered around what Amaba wanted to learn. The goals had to be those that were important to her. I wanted to help Amaba become aware of her environment and help her gain the tool--English--that would help her change that environment if she so desired. Her goals included wanting to talk on the phone. She wanted to be able to take messages for her husband when he wasn't home and she wanted to be able to talk to anyone that might call for her. She also wanted to be able to go to the grocery store without dragging her husband, three year old son, and nine year old daughter along. The grocery store was only a few yards from her house, but she lacked the confidence to go there on her own. She also wanted to be able to read books to her three year old son. Her son was just beginning nursery school and he was being read to at school, and Amaba wanted to continue this at home. She also wanted to learn some new recipes. She loved to cook and wanted to learn how to make some new dishes. She also wanted to learn how to drive, a goal I thought perfect for learning English.

Besides giving her the freedom of having a car, it would also give me the opportunity to teach her how to read signs. Unfortunately, this goal had to be deleted because of her husband's strong objections. Amaba also wanted to write letters back to her family in Ethiopia, but they couldn't understand English and I certainly didn't want them to have to wait for me to learn their language, so that goal had to be tabled also.

I should mention that from my ESL/EFL training, I realized that it would be best to teach Amaba to read fluently in her own native language first and then, teach her how to read in English. But I didn't know the first thing about her language and she wanted to learn how to survive in an English speaking world immediately. Consequently, the theoretically sound had to be sacrificed for the practical.

Once Amaba had established her goals, we were able to combine the goals of reading to her son, going to the supermarket without her husband, and learning some new recipes into a series of lessons centered around making pancakes.

Amaba had attended a pancake breakfast with her family and wanted to learn how to make pancakes. So, we combined reading the pancake recipe, making a list of what we needed to buy at the store, going to the store to buy the ingredients, making the pancakes, and creating an language

experience story based on Tomie de Paulo's book, Pancakes for Breakfast.

The reason I used the language experience approach (LEA) with Amaba is that it involves using the reader's own language to create the story. It is based on the principle that when students create their own stories, they are more involved in the story, are more familiar with the language used and are, therefore, better able to understand the story that they have created. Many times students can read words, phrases, etc. in their language experience stories that they can't read in other contexts. Obviously, LEA also works on the principle of incorporating background knowledge. The more a student knows about a particular subject, the easier that subject will be to read about and vice versa. LEA stories purposely draw on students' already existing background knowledge (Rigg, 1981).

According to Roach van Allen in his book, Language Experiences in Communication:

> A language experience approach is recognition in daily practice that learning is based on the background and experience of the learner and that his efforts to communicate that experience may take many forms. (1976: 3)

Frank Smith agrees with this approach and goes on to say:

> Anything that I cannot relate to the theory of

the world in my head will not make sense to me. (1978: 57)

I knew before we began reading that it was going to be a very foreign task for Amaba. Yet, it was important to me that despite her lack of language skills, she had immediate success with the task. I felt that the language experience approach was the best way to achieve this. I also knew that Amaba's command of the English language was only enough for her to read the most basic stories and feel successful. Yet, I felt through LEA, she would be capable of reading and understanding much more complicated stories because she had created them herself.

I began with LEA stories for Amaba for many of these reasons. Using this language experience approach also enabled me to apply the psycholinguistic theory of reading to my tutoring. In creating these stories, I was the scribe. A silent scribe at that. Amaba created the stories and I wrote down exactly what she dictated to me in the exact way she said it. Every few sentences, I would pause and read back to Amaba what she had dictated to me to ensure that I was copying it down correctly. While I was copying the story, I made a carbon copy which I gave to Amaba at the end of her dictation. We would then usually read the story together, again making any changes that she felt appropriate and she would keep the book and

the story to study during the week. The following week, I would return with a typed copy of the story and she would re-read it once again for errors.

The following is an excerpt from one of the first language experience stories Amaba created from the wordless picture book, Pancakes for Breakfast. It's obviously very elementary, but when Amaba first began her tutoring about four months before, it was a struggle to say "Hello". In these first language experience stories, Amaba would only call out exactly what she saw in the pictures on the pages of the book.

> No leaves, cold weather. One woman sleeping on the bed. Doggie on the rug. Woman clean face. Dry on the towel. Woman apron. Woman is cookbook. Woman in the kitchen. Taking bowl. Woman take flour. Put flour in bowl. Woman carry bowl. She go outside. Woman taking eggs.

I did not supply Amaba with any information except when she asked me the name for those things which she did not yet know the English word for. It's obvious here that Amaba is not making any predictions about what's coming next in the story nor does she explain why the character in the story is acting as she is or how the character in the story feels. Grammar errors are also prevalent in this language experience story. Clearly, Amaba is only

describing exactly what she sees in each picture. The second picture in the book is that of a woman sleeping on a bed, and that's exactly how Amaba explains it.

The next excerpt is a language experience story that Amaba created about this same book, Pancakes for Breakfast, four months later. What is especially interesting about this corrected version is that I had not tutored Amaba for six weeks before this was written because of Christmas vacation. Her reading and English had progressed a great deal by this time.

> Snowing outside on the winter time. Woman sleeping on the bed with cat. Dog waking up. Woman washing face and thinking about pancakes. Woman putting on apron. Woman getting cookbook. Woman reading pancake recipe. Woman taking bowl. Woman taking flour. Woman putting flour in the bowl. Woman looking for eggs--no eggs. Woman going outside to get eggs. Woman getting eggs from chickens.

In this version, Amaba is no longer just calling out what she sees in the pictures; instead, she is able to connect the entire story together. She is able to express how the woman is feeling and the purpose for the character's action.

In the first version, the woman was only washing her face, but now she's washing her face and thinking about

making pancakes. In the first version, there was no connection between the fact that there weren't any eggs and that's why the woman was going outside, while in the second version, she clearly explains this.

> Woman looking for eggs--no eggs. Woman going outside to get eggs. Woman getting eggs from chickens.

There are still grammar errors in this second version, but it's clearly an improvement over the first version in that she is no longer only calling out what she sees in the pictures. Reading and re-reading these stories became a tool which helped Amaba to increase her knowledge and control of the English language.

One of Amaba's goals was reading to her son. Her son had brought the book, Little Red Hen, home from school and Amaba asked me to help her so that she could read it to him. I read this book to her several times before we created the following language experience story because I wanted Amaba's story to be as similar as possible to the one which her son was accustomed to hearing at school. Therefore, this language experience story is a mixture of retelling and a language experience story.

First, here is an excerpt from the story we created toward the beginning of her tutoring.

Little Red Hen lived in the house. Red working outside. The cat sleeping on the sofa. Cat lazy. Doggie hammock sleeping. Mouse sleeping on the chair next to fire. Little Red washing dishes.

Once again, it's obvious that Amaba is basically just calling out exactly what she sees in the pictures. She's not making any connections between what's happening at the beginning of the story with what's happening toward the end. The first picture is of the Little Red Hen outside the house and that's exactly what she says. There is no mention of the dog, cat, and mouse even though they also live in the house. She doesn't discuss any of the characters' feelings or reasons for their actions. There are many grammatical errors.

The next excerpt is from a story that was created about four months after this first version.

Little Red, cat, dog, and mouse live in the house. Little Red working all the time. Little Red hanging clothes. Little Red cleaning on the house. Cat, dog, mouse lazy. Cat sleeping on the sofa. Dog sleeping on the hammock. Mouse sit down sleeping on the chair. Little Red washing dishes. Little Red, "Who will help me?"

Amaba is no longer calling out exactly what she sees in the pictures. Her story now has connections between the

beginning, middle, and end of the story; the cat, dog, and mouse now live with the Little Red Hen in the house, although the first picture is only of the Little Red Hen. She is making generalizations now and then giving examples of these generalizations. She says the cat, dog, and mouse are lazy and she describes their laziness. She says that the Little Red Hen is working all the time and she describes her actions. And, although there are still some grammatical errors, this version is clearly an improvement over the first version of the story.

In addition to creating language experience stories from books, we also created these stories from Amaba's personal experiences. In one of my most recent visits to her apartment, I had planned to have her re-read the stories, Pancakes and Little Red, once again so that I could report any further improvements that she had made. But when I arrived at Amaba's sparsely furnished duplex, Amaba was anxious to show me a photograph that had recently been taken of her family. In the photo, she was sitting on the couch next to her husband, while her son and daughter knelt on the floor at their feet. She was so proud and excited about the picture that she asked if we could write a story about it. As a proponant of Freire, how could I refuse? After all, whatever was the most

pressing and important to Amaba was exactly what we would address. Here is an excerpt from this story.

> I am Little Red Hen--busy all day in the house. No help from my family because my husband is busy in office. My daughter busy in homework from school. My son is too small.

Amaba is the Little Red Hen! Not only was she able to create language experience stories and improve upon them, she was also able to compare herself to one of the characters in the story. She was able to relate the story to her own experiences. Literature was her tool for becoming conscious of her own environment. It may also be the tool she will use to change her environment--to get that driver's license, to venture from her sheltered status, to also become "too busy" to do the housework.

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